

Against the Grain

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People Profile: Patrick Sommers

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popular? And what is the length of time in these agreements? Do most aggregators have standard terms?

PS: For the past 20+ years, there has been a relatively standard means for licensing and aggregating periodicals. Titles are typically licensed non-exclusively with “evergreen” agreements (renewed annually). Publishers are paid a royalty based on usage of their content. As a result, publishers with high-use titles tend to make more than those with low-use titles. It has been largely viewed as a fair system that provides broad and fair access to content and allows libraries to make purchase decisions based on which products have the right mix of content, interface features, and price for their user community.

Now that model is being disrupted by aggressive tactics, which result in royalty payments 10 to 20 times the previous amount paid and give the vendor the ability to restrict and control access. One can’t necessarily fault the publisher for taking the money, but who is ultimately going to pay for this extreme cost escalation? We think it is clear that it will be libraries. If the periodical aggregation business moves to a monopoly, we believe the impact on libraries will be catastrophic.

***ATG:** How many publishers are out there for aggregators to sign agreements with? How many single publishers? How many publishing conglomerates?*

PS: Globally, there are thousands of publishers whose titles make their way into aggregated databases. We seek to work with all publishers and work hard to maintain our relationships with them. Because **Gale** is a publisher too, we understand the issues publishers face.

We’ve long held the position that exclusive arrangements are bad for publishers, as well as libraries. By restricting access to content, the usage and exposure of content is limited and, ultimately, its value is diminished. Most publishers understand this and license content to multiple vendors, but others base their decision on expedient, short-term financial considerations. However, some publishers have realized the negative long-term impact of exclusive licensing agreements on their business and have returned to non-exclusive licensing. We are working to educate publishers and libraries that non-exclusive licensing is best for both groups.

***ATG:** I have to show my colors here. I will put on my miniscule publisher hat. My husband and I publish *Against the Grain* which is a labor of love. I receive licensing agreements on a regular basis from all of the aggregators. They want my full-text content in their database. But the amount of money that I could recover compared to the revenue that I get from ads and subscriptions (not a fortune, mind you) allows me to continue to publish *Against the Grain*. If I were to license my fulltext content to aggregators, I could not afford to publish *ATG* anymore. Putting on*

against the grain people profile

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Patrick C. Sommers

BORN AND LIVED: Cape Girardeau, MO until I joined Dun & Bradstreet in 1969. Since then I have lived in 11 different cities and 18 different homes.

EARLY LIFE: Grew up in an idyllic small town in the '50s-'60s — did all the things you read in books and see in movies. At 14 got my first job in the food services business (curb hop), and when I was 16 upgraded to working in the local public library.

FAMILY: A wife (**Barbara**) and a daughter (**Whitney**) living in Minneapolis.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Read, play golf, listen to music, travel.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Very eclectic taste — same in music.

PET PEEVES: Hidden agendas, anything less than the truth.

PHILOSOPHY: Understanding requires Context. We have the opportunity to define the future if we are bold enough to let go of the past.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: All of them are memorable — I have been fortunate to have worked with some outstanding people during my career.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: I hope to be in a position to make a small positive difference in the world. I also hope to get my handicap down to a single digit.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:

It depends on the industry’s willingness to embrace change. The convergence of technology, changing business models, and the Internet is accelerating. This will have a profound impact on libraries and our education systems and consequently those industries serving them. You don’t need to look any further than the newspaper and periodical industries to see how a long-term, stable business model can come apart and relatively quickly. 🌱



my librarian’s hat, I would probably cancel the print subscription for my library if I could get the content from an aggregator online.

So, the aggregator database scenario is generally not good for a small publisher like me. It is good for the library by and large. The irresistible force meets the immovable object. So, I am sympathetic with Time, Inc., and Forbes. They are bigger publishers but they still have to maintain their subscribers so that they can continue to publish their content. What’s the aggregator solution? Will we continue to have aggregator databases? Will the aggregators force some good publishers to quit publishing? None of us wants that, right?

PS: There’s a clear distinction to be made here. Users do not access the information in a database in the same way that they do when they subscribe and receive a print copy. That is, rarely does anyone use an aggregated database to sit down and read the latest issue of *Time* or *People*.

The value of an aggregated database is the ability to, for instance, search by subject across a plethora of titles, search for a specific article or writer, or see how a topic was covered at a particular point in time, etc.

Consequently, we believe that the subscription business is not impacted by a general-interest title’s inclusion in a database any more than free copies in a doctor’s office impact subscriptions. Licensing royalties are incremental revenue to general-interest publishers.

In addition to serving users with quality information in the context of other searchable content, aggregated databases promote brand awareness for publishers. The value to publishers — smaller ones in particular — is that their brand is served up along with other quality publications and is highly visible to hundreds of millions of information-seekers annually. This exposure frequently leads to individuals seeking out subscriptions to a publication they were not aware of previously.

We still believe there is tremendous value to aggregated databases. That said, we also see tremendous value to new product concepts that we are developing. Our portal products — Global Issues in Context, GREENR, Career Transitions, and more — take information delivery to the next level by providing information in context, with Web 2.0 community tools and Website-like interfaces.

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